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Bishop, at Casey's Rites, Questions Contra Aid

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ROSLYN HARBOR, L.I., May 9 — The funeral here today for William J. Casey, the former Director of Central Intelligence who died Wednesday, was marked by the controversy that continues to swirl around President Reagan's policy of aiding the rebels fighting the Government of Nicaragua.

With Mr. Reagan occupying a front-row pew in St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church here, Bishop John McGann of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre, which covers Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk Counties, denounced "the violence wrought in Central America" by the Administration's support for the rebels, known as contras.

Bishop McGann, who said he had known Mr. Casey for many years, delivered the eulogy at a funeral mass attended by 350 invited guests, including President Reagan, his wife, Nancy, former President Richard M. Nixon and many top officials of an Administration that has made support of the contras a cornerstone of its foreign policy.

That policy is being scrutinized in hearings that began this week on Capitol Hill, and Mr. Casey's death could leave unanswered some of the key questions regarding the Administration's actions in the Central America. The hearings, which are expected to last three months, are examining the sale of arms to Iran and the diversion of profits to the contras.

The Casey family has established the William J. Casey Fund for the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters to receive contributions in his memory. Richard V. Secord, the former Air Force general who testified at the Washington hearings all week, said he wanted to donate any funds left over from the arms deal to the Casey Fund, but lawmakers said it should be returned to the United States Treasury.

Bishop McGann acknowledged Mr.

Casey's deep devotion to the contras' cause and said that his "conviction about the fundamentally moral purpose of American actions, I'm sure, made incomprehensible to him the ethical questions raised by me as his bishop about our nation's defense policies since the dawn of the nuclear age."

"I'm equally sure," the Bishop said, "that Bill must have thought us bishops blind to the potential for a Communist threat in this hemisphere as we opposed and continue to oppose the violence wrought in Central America by support of the contras."

While opposing the policy that Mr. Casey fought so hard to support, Bishop McGann credited the former Director of Central Intelligence with a deep sense of patriotism.

"I cannot conceal nor disguise my fundamental disagreement on this matter with a man I knew and respected," the Bishop said, "but given the world as he saw it, Bill was seeking to do what was best for the United States and the freedom that allowed him to worship God openly as a Catholic."

Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the former chief United States delegate to the United Nations, delivered a eulogy at the conclusion of the service, and referred briefly to the Nicaraguan controversy.

"Supporting the Nicaraguan freedom fighters had a special priority for him, no question about it, but that had no more priority than law," Ms. Kirkpatrick said of Mr. Casey.

A number of investigators have suggested that Mr. Casey might have been guilty of violating the Boland Amendment, which barred the government from aiding the contra rebels for two years.

Recent 'Ill-Informed Comments'

Dr. Kirkpatrick acknowledged that Mr. Casey has been subject to many "mean-spirited and ill-informed comments" in recent days. He was widely regarded on Capitol Hill as an uncooperative and even devious figure who tried to circumvent Congressional attempts to monitor and oversee secret intelligence operations.

Dr. Kirkpatrick characterized Mr. Casey as a "bold, committed man in an age rent by controversy." He was not, she added, "afraid of the Devil."

Mr. Casey was 74 years old when he died of pneumonia at a hospital near here on Wednesday. He had suffered a brain seizure last December, the day before he was due to testify at Congressional hearings on the Iran-contra affair, and was later operated on for the removal of a malignant brain tumor.

Hampered by speech and mobility problems, Mr. Casey resigned as Director of Central Intelligence in February. William H. Webster, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was nominated to replace Mr. Casey, and he is likely to be approved by the Senate shortly.

President Reagan and his wife were both dressed in black for the funeral of Mr. Casey, who continued to maintain a home here on Long Island in his many years in government service in Washington.

When the war ended, he became a Marshall Plan adviser; the Fordham law school graduate then became a New York City tax attorney. He served as the head of the Securities and Exchange Commission in the Nixon and Ford administrations.

A friend of Ronald Reagan who helped manage his 1980 campaign, Mr. Casey became the first Director of Central Intelligence to sit in the President's Cabinet in 1981. He led an aggressive campaign to rebuild the agency. His tenure was also marked by conflicts with Congress over covert operations, particularly in Nicaragua.

Mr. Casey's family requested that in lieu of flowers, donations be sent to the William J. Casey Fund for the Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters — a decision that prompted local clergymen to stage a protest about one mile from the church today.